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**The Role of Government and Community Participation in the Success of
School Feeding Programs in Secondary Schools in Tanzania**



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The Role of Government and Community Participation in the Success of School Feeding Programs in Secondary Schools in Tanzania

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Abstract:

Purpose: School feeding programs are increasingly recognized as strategic interventions to improve student attendance and educational equity. Globally, these initiatives have shown positive effects on learners' retention and academic performance. In Tanzania, particularly in rural areas like Kongwa District, school feeding programs are implemented amid logistical and community-level challenges. The purpose of this paper was to assess the role of government and community participation in the implementation of feeding programs in secondary schools in Kongwa district, Dodoma-Tanzania.

Methodology: The study employed a mixed-methods approach within a descriptive research design to assess the perceived impact of feeding programs on student attendance in secondary schools. Purposive sampling was used to select 5 schools, from which 30 students and 10 teachers were involved through questionnaires, interviews, and document analysis. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were examined thematically.

Findings: Findings revealed that limited community participation and low awareness, poverty, inadequate funding from the government, and limited alignment of national feeding programs' policies and implementation affect the sustainability of programs in the selected secondary schools in Kongwa, Dodoma.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: The study recommended stronger policy enforcement, strengthening community/ parental participation and ownership are crucial for feeding programs' success and overall students' well-being. Moreover, the government should provide more funds to ensure the sustainability of the feeding programs in secondary schools in Tanzania.

Keywords: *Feeding Programs, Program Sustainability, Policies, Community Participation, Funding*

1. INTRODUCTION

School feeding programs (SFPs) have gained global recognition as a cost-effective and scalable intervention to address hunger, improve education outcomes, and support children's health and development (Zhang, 2021). According to the World Food Program (WFP), (2022), over 388 million children worldwide benefit from school meals. These programs have been implemented in more than 160 countries and are often integrated with broader education and social protection strategies. The rationale is straightforward, children who are well-nourished are more likely to attend school regularly, concentrate in class, and perform better academically. In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), SFPs are also used to alleviate short-term hunger and encourage school enrollment, particularly among disadvantaged populations.

At the regional level, school feeding has become a central strategy in improving education outcomes in sub-Saharan Africa, where issues of food insecurity, poverty, and child malnutrition remain prevalent. Many African governments, in partnership with international agencies such as WFP, UNICEF, and the African Union, have institutionalized national school feeding programs as part of their education and development policies. For example, Ghana, South Africa, and Nigeria have implemented large-scale, government-led programs that have shown positive results in improving attendance and retention, particularly among girls and children from food-insecure households (Abdulai, 2015; Kandker, 2021). These efforts align with the African Union's Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program (CAADP) and the Home-Grown School Feeding (HGSF) initiative, which aims to link school meals to local agricultural production and community development.

In the East African region, countries such as Kenya, Uganda, and Rwanda have increasingly prioritized school feeding in their education sector plans. Kenya's National School Meals and Nutrition Strategy (2017–2022) provides meals to over 1.5 million children, especially in arid and semi-arid lands. Studies from the region, including those by Omwami (2015) and Appiah (2024), have demonstrated the significant role that school feeding programs play in increasing attendance and improving the nutritional status of learners. However, despite their apparent benefits, many programs in East Africa still face implementation challenges such as inadequate funding, logistical difficulties, lack of enforcement of policies on feeding programs, and limited community ownership.

In Tanzania, school feeding initiatives have been implemented with varying degrees of success across both primary and secondary education levels. The government introduced the National School Feeding Guidelines in 2017 through the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (URT, 2017), aimed at promoting consistent meal provision and aligning efforts with national development goals. While primary schools have been the main focus of most interventions, secondary schools, particularly in semi-arid, rural, and economically disadvantaged districts like Kongwa, remain underrepresented in school feeding research and policy implementation. These

schools often grapple with food shortages, erratic attendance patterns, and high dropout rates, especially during peak farming seasons when children are required to support household labor.

Existing studies such as Maijo (2018), Massawe (2021) and Lukindo (2018) have shown a positive correlation between school feeding programs and student attendance in schools. However, gaps remain in understanding how both the government and communities are involved in the operationalization of these programs in secondary schools, to ensure their sustainability, in alignment with policies. In Kongwa District, where poverty and food insecurity are persistent challenges, the role of school feeding programs in supporting education requires further investigation. Understanding how the government and communities collaborate provided valuable insights into the effectiveness and sustainability of these programs.

This paper, therefore, examined the government roles and community participation in school feeding programs in secondary schools within Kongwa District, Tanzania. By focusing on the government roles and community involvement, the paper generated evidence to inform local and national policy decisions, improve implementation strategies, to enable sustainability of school feeding programs in secondary schools in Tanzania.

1.2 Study's objective

The objective of this study was to examine the government's roles and community participation in the success of the feeding programs in secondary schools in Kongwa, Dodoma-Tanzania.

1.3 Problem Statement

The government of Tanzania, through the National School Feeding Guidelines (URT, 2017), promotes feeding as a strategy to retain students in schools. However, there are limited studies on the roles of the government and the community participation in the success implementation of these programs in rural districts, Kongwa being the one.

While some schools have successfully mobilized community participation, others struggle due to poverty, lack of awareness, or weak coordination. Furthermore, national policies are not always aligned with local capacity. These gaps hinder consistent implementation, reducing the potential benefits of school feeding programs and their sustainability. This study therefore, investigated how the government and communities participate in the implementation of school feeding programs in secondary schools to ensure success and sustainability of these programs. The study contributes to both policy and practice of feeding programs in secondary schools in Tanzania, taking Kongwa district as a case study.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Empirical Literature Review

Globally, research has shown the positive impact of school feeding programs with students' attendance and academic outcomes. In Ghana, Gelli et al. (2016)'s study found that school feeding

programs have resulted to increased enrollment and reduced absenteeism. In India, Chakrabarti et al. (2016) reported improved attendance and academic outcomes due to daily meal provision. Additionally, Omwami (2015) noted significant benefits in the implemented schools in Uganda and Kenya, particularly among low-income students.

In Tanzania, Massawe (2021) observed attendance improvements of up to 25% in Kilimanjaro primary schools. Lukindo (2018) emphasized community participation as key to sustaining programs. However, many schools reported irregular food supplies and low parental involvement. Lazaro and Msuya (2022) highlighted logistical challenges and weak monitoring mechanisms. These patterns suggest that while feeding programs improve attendance, however, local implementation challenges persist.

In Tanzania, several studies have examined the role of school feeding programs in boosting student attendance and performance. Lazaro and Msuya's (2022) study in Dodoma region, observed a 14% improvement in attendance in schools with consistent meal provision. However, they noted that many schools failed to meet the 2017 National School Feeding Guidelines, leading to disparities in implementation. It could therefore be argued that while government policy supports feeding programs, most schools operate with minimal oversight and inconsistent funding, risking of poor implementation and sustainability.

2.2 Theoretical Review

This study was underpinned by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, developed by Abraham Maslow in 1943. The theory posits that individuals must satisfy basic physiological needs, such that food, water and shelter before focusing on higher-order needs like learning and self-actualization. In an educational setting, unmet of the basic needs like feeding may result in poor concentration, absenteeism, and disengagement. Maslow's theory directly informs the study by explaining the intrinsic link between school meals and student attendance; that, when students are assured of food at school, their physiological needs are met, enabling better academic focus. The theory justifies why feeding programs are essential, especially in poverty-prone rural areas like Kongwa.

This theoretical foundation aligns directly with Tanzania's National School Feeding Guidelines (URT, 2017). The guidelines were developed to formalize the country's approach to school feeding and emphasize the importance of food security in achieving educational equity, student retention, and national development goals. The guidelines recognize that hunger remains a key barrier to access and participation in education and call for the integration of nutrition support into the education system, especially in vulnerable areas like Kongwa District. However, the manner in which these guidelines are implemented in schools remains unclear. Therefore, this study filled this gap.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) to allow for a comprehensive understanding of the impact of school feeding programs. The quantitative approach involved structured questionnaires distributed to 30 students and 10 teachers. The qualitative aspect used interviews and focus group discussions with teachers, students, and administrators. This design was chosen to triangulate data and capture nuanced perceptions.

3.2 Sampling Techniques

This paper employed purposive sampling (Creswell, 2014), a non-probability sampling technique that involves the deliberate selection of participants based on their knowledge, experience, and involvement in the subject under investigation. In this case, the technique was chosen to ensure the inclusion of individuals with direct engagement in the implementation, management, or experience of school feeding programs in secondary schools within Kongwa District. Schools were selected in consultation with the District Education Office to ensure they had active feeding programs and represented different geographic and socioeconomic contexts within the district.

From five selected secondary schools, respondents were drawn from four key stakeholder groups: heads of schools, food committee members, teachers, and students. These groups were chosen because of their distinct roles and perspectives related to the design, implementation, and effects of school feeding programs. Heads of schools, for example, are responsible for overall school management and are involved in monitoring attendance and coordinating feeding efforts. School food committee members represented parents and the community, provided oversight and support for school-level decisions, including contributions toward feeding. Food committee members are responsible for the daily operations of the feeding program, including food procurement, preparation, and distribution. Teachers were included because they interact with students on a daily basis and are best positioned to observe changes in attendance and classroom behavior. Finally, students were included because they are the primary beneficiaries of the feeding initiative, and they offered essential insights into how the availability or absence of meals influences their school attendance, motivation, and learning.

The total sample comprised 75 participants, broken down as follows: 5 heads of schools, 9 food committee members, 10 teachers, and 50 students. Each category of respondents was purposefully selected based on their involvement in or experience with the feeding program. Students were chosen to reflect gender balance and representation from different class levels, while other respondents were selected based on their availability, willingness to participate, and depth of knowledge about the program.

The use of purposive sampling enabled the researcher to gather context-specific, reliable, and meaningful data that reflected the lived experiences and practical challenges associated with school feeding programs.

3.3 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection for this study was carried out through a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, consistent with the study's mixed-methods research design (Kothari, 2004). This approach allowed for the integration of numerical data and narrative insights to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of the government and community participation in the success of feeding programs in schools. Quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire that was administered to both students and teachers. The questionnaire was designed to gather factual and perceptual information on various aspects of the school feeding program, including meal consistency, student attendance trends, classroom participation, and perceived benefits of the program.

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs), and they were analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interviews were conducted with heads of schools, teachers, food committee members. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and followed a flexible guide with open-ended questions tailored to the respondent's role. The interviews explored themes such as program implementation challenges, community involvement, student behavior, and alignment with the National School Feeding Guidelines. Interviews were conducted in both English and Kiswahili depending on the participant's preference, and all sessions were audio-recorded with the participants' consent.

In addition, five focus group discussions were held with students to explore their lived experiences and attitudes toward the feeding programs. Each FGD included 6–8 students and lasted approximately one hour. This method was particularly useful in encouraging peer interaction and revealing insights that may not have emerged in individual responses.

To complement primary data, document review was also conducted. School records such as attendance registers, feeding rosters, meeting minutes, and food supply records were examined to verify patterns reported in interviews and questionnaires. This triangulation helped to validate the consistency and accuracy of self-reported data. The use of multiple tools of questionnaires, interviews, FGDs, and document reviews enabled the researcher to collect rich, reliable, and contextually grounded data. Documents such as attendance registers and supply records were used to validate self-reported data.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the findings based on six core themes. The discussion integrates participants' direct quotations, the study's guiding theory (Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs), the National School Feeding Guidelines (URT, 2017), and empirical literature. Table 4.1 below

presents demographic data of respondents, which revealed their working experiences in the feeding program in the selected secondary schools. The respondents' varied working histories made it possible to gather data for several periods.

Table 4.1: Working Experience by Role

Years	Class Teachers	Heads of Schools	Food Committee Members	Total
6–10	4 (30%)	2 (49%)	3 (48%)	9 (37%)
11–15	4 (24%)	0 (0%)	4 (19%)	8 (21%)
16–20	2 (14%)	3 (22%)	2 (12%)	7 (17%)
20+	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

The data show that most respondents (37%) had between 6 and 10 years of working experience. A smaller proportion had 11 to 15 years (21%) and 16 to 20 years (17%) of experience, while none of the respondents had more than 20 years of experience. The respondents' diverse work experiences made it possible to collect data covering different time periods. This helped determine whether there had been any changes or improvements in the implementation of school feeding programs over time.

4.1 Community and parental participation

The findings have revealed that lack of awareness, lack or little community/parental participation and poverty were identified as challenges in the success implementation of school feeding programs in schools as elaborated below.

4.1.1 Limited community participation and low awareness

From the findings, significant challenge noted in most schools was lack of awareness and low community participation hindered the success of the implementation feeding programs in schools.

One head of school said that:

“Community engagement in the school feeding program remains low, largely due to a lack of awareness and a limited sense of ownership among parents and guardians. Many do not perceive the program as a shared responsibility, often viewing it as solely the government’s obligation.” (Interview with head of school, school B, April 2025).

The statement above clearly indicates that community engagement in school feeding programs is low, with many parents demonstrating limited awareness of their expected role. In several cases, parents appeared unaware that their involvement—such as contributing firewood, labor, or small financial support—was essential to sustaining the program. This situation closely reflects the findings of Roothaert et al. (2021), who studied Home-Grown School Feeding Programs in

Arumeru and Babati Districts, Tanzania. Their study reported that economic constraints prevented parents from contributing resources like firewood or voluntary labor, which significantly affected the regularity and efficiency of meal preparation in schools.

While some schools had active food committees, others reported little to no contribution from families.

A student from School E explained:

“My parents say it’s the government’s responsibility, not theirs. They don’t help at all.” (FGD with students in school E, April 2025).

Similarly, a teacher from School C explained:

“Without parents’ support, the program suffers. Sometimes they refuse to contribute food or labour, thinking it’s a donor project.” (Interview with teacher, School C, April 2025).

These sentiments illustrate a disconnect between national expectations and community perceptions. According to the URT (2017) guidelines, communities are expected to play an active role through the Home-Grown School Feeding model. Yet without adequate sensitization, many parents remain passive or indifferent. These findings align with Lukindo (2018) and Kondowe (2019), who found that weak community mobilization undermines feeding sustainability in Tanzania and Malawi. Maslow’s theory, while focused on individual needs, also underscores the importance of a stable environment, which is influenced by family and community support.

Moreover, the findings revealed that, in some schools, parents were actively participated in the feeding programs while other schools reported to have low participation. Schools with low participation assumed it is the school’s or government’s responsibility to provide food for students in schools. others not in involvement. This is well elaborated below:

A head of School C explained:

“The feeding program works best when parents are involved. But many parents think it is the job of the school, and therefore, they don’t contribute willingly.” (Interview with head of school C, April 2025)

This concern was also shared during focus group with students, explaining:

“I heard my parents say the school should be responsible for food because they already paid taxes.” (FGD with students, school B, April 2025).

These perceptions reflect broader issues of ownership. Massawe (2021) emphasizes that community involvement significantly enhances the continuity and sustainability of school feeding

programs. Lack of consistent parental input in Kongwa risks the success and sustainability of feeding programs in schools.

4.1.2 Poverty

From the findings, it was reported that one of the constraints of community participation in the feeding programs is due to poverty.

One committee member had a concern about the scarcity of funds, added that:

“As much as we want to support the school feeding program, it’s not always easy to contribute on time. Sometimes we don’t have enough food even for our own families, and money is scarce, especially during the dry season.” (Interview with food committee member, April 2025)

These shared sentiments illustrate that limited and unreliable funding not only affects program sustainability but also directly impacts students’ ability to learn and stay engaged in school.

The issue of poverty was a recurring theme, as many parents faced financial hardships that prevented them from offering meaningful support.

A food committee member added:

“It’s true that some schools are doing better because they have more support or land to farm, but others struggle every term. In our school, if parents don’t contribute enough, we have no choice but to reduce the number of meals. There’s no consistent system, and it feels like every school is left to figure things out on its own. This creates unfairness for the students.” (Interview with food committee member, school C, April 2025)

The findings of this study are consistent with those of Chakrabarti (2016), whose research in India examined the effectiveness of decentralized school feeding models in rural communities, with a focus on parental involvement and community-based food sourcing. In the study, it was noted variations in program effectiveness across regions due to differences in implementation, food quality, and local administrative capacity, highlighting the importance of strong institutional support and monitoring mechanisms.

4.2 Inadequate funding from the government

During interviews with heads of schools, teachers and food committee members, the budgetary constraints were indicated as a significant barrier in some studied schools. It was reported that limited funds affected timely food procurement, quality of meals, and the ability to pay supporting staff.

The dependency on irregular government or donor funding means schools often face disruptions in meal provision, affecting both consistency and student satisfaction.

One Head of the school revealed that:

“The feeding program is often disrupted due to inadequate funding and sometimes due the delays in funding. It’s heartbreaking to see children go without meals simply because resources are not released on time. This makes it difficult sometimes for smooth run of the program” (Interview with a head of school, school D, April 2025)

On a similar avenue, during the Focus Group Discussion, one student stressed on this point by showing how limited funding affects feeding programs in schools:

“There are times we come to school expecting lunch, only to be told there’s no food because funds haven’t arrived. It makes learning difficult when you’re hungry.” (FGD with students, school A, April, 2025)

The responses from respondents collectively highlighted the critical impact of inadequate and delayed funding on the effectiveness of school feeding programs. The findings have revealed that inconsistent financial support and delay of funding disrupt meal provision and undermine the smooth operation of the program, often leaving students without food, which also could impact students’ school attendance.

4.3 Limited alignment of national policy and implementation

The findings were also revealed a gap in policy knowledge and feeding program implementation. Three out of five schools reported that they had not received any formal training or documentation on the National School Feeding Guidelines, only two of the five surveyed schools demonstrated clear alignment with the National School Feeding Guidelines (2013). In other schools, feeding activities were informal and often undocumented. Many teachers reported insufficient training or supervision regarding feeding policy. A Head of School D admitted:

“We know about the National School Feeding Guidelines, but we’ve never received training on it. So, we just manage as best as we can.” (Interview with Head of School, School D, April, 2025).

The statement above illustrates a significant gap and poor policy dissemination and support at the grassroots level. It echoes the findings of Lazaro and Msuya (2022), who found that schools in Dodoma failed to fully apply national guidelines due to poor dissemination, lack of oversight, and capacity constraints at the school level. Accordingly, Shafi (2021), says training and ongoing technical support are critical to ensure schools adhere to national standards. Without this, schools risk implementing the program inconsistently or ineffectively. This also contradicts the URT (2017) guidelines, which require district education officers to conduct regular capacity-building and monitoring visits. This study, therefore, suggest that, improving the alignment between policy and practice is essential to ensure that school feeding programs are effective, sustainable, inclusive, and have a meaningful impact.

5. CONCLUSION

This study assessed the government roles and community participation in the success of feeding programs in the five selected secondary schools in Kongwa district, Dodoma-Tanzania. The study has found that feeding programs play a significant role in improving students' participation in learning activities, and the overall wellbeing of students in schools. Despite these benefits, challenges such as limited community support, poverty, inadequate funding from the government which causes irregular food supply, and weak alignment with national guidelines hinder the full potential of these programs. Enhanced efforts from both the government and community at large are required to make school feeding initiatives more consistent, participatory, and policy-aligned. These improvements will ensure programs sustainability and therefore, improving students' wellbeing in schools.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and discussion, several recommendations are proposed to improve the effectiveness and sustainability of school feeding programs in Tanzanian secondary schools. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology should strengthen school–community coordination by establishing food committees comprising parents, teachers, and local leaders to manage daily feeding activities. Education bodies at all levels should enhance community engagement through regular sensitization meetings led by school heads to promote collective ownership and support. Continuous capacity building for school personnel is essential, with training provided on implementing and monitoring feeding programs in line with the National School Feeding Guidelines (URT, 2017). District education officers should facilitate these trainings and introduce incentives for compliant schools while enforcing corrective measures for underperforming ones. Furthermore, the Ministry and local authorities should improve procurement and logistical systems to ensure timely and consistent food delivery. Lastly, the government and development partners should promote decentralization of funding and decision-making to empower schools to address local challenges more effectively in managing feeding programs.

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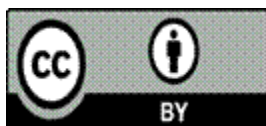
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